

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Hans O. Heistad
1871-1945

When Hans O. Heistad, a Norwegian-born landscape gardener, arrived in the United States in 1905, the country was in a period of economic prosperity. The wealthy were building large summer cottages and country residences, many of which included grounds professionally designed by firms specializing in landscape architecture. Indeed, after years of public and community service, beginning with the plan designed

by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux for Central Park in New York City, the landscape profession became dominated by private commissions on large residential properties. Among them were a number of projects carried out by Hans Heistad in the Camden-Rockport area.

Heistad was born in Brevik, Norway, 100 miles southwest of Oslo, the son of a boat builder and lumberman and the youngest of six children. After completing secondary school, Heistad studied landscape gardening and horticulture in Norway and Denmark. For a number of years he was employed as a foreman in landscaping and horticulture firms in Germany. On his return from Germany, he taught for eight years at the same gardening school he had attended in Tonsberg, Norway, and ran a landscaping and flower business. This business was so successful that Heistad invested his profits in a shipping venture. When two ships were lost at sea, a discouraged Heistad emigrated to America hoping to find a more secure life for his family.

Heistad passed through Ellis Island in 1905 and quickly found work as a carpenter in New York City. When the Businessman's Panic of 1907 depressed the construction industry, an unemployed Heistad returned briefly to Norway. In 1909 he passed through Ellis Island for a second time and found employment as a landscape gardener on large estates in the greater New York metropolitan area.

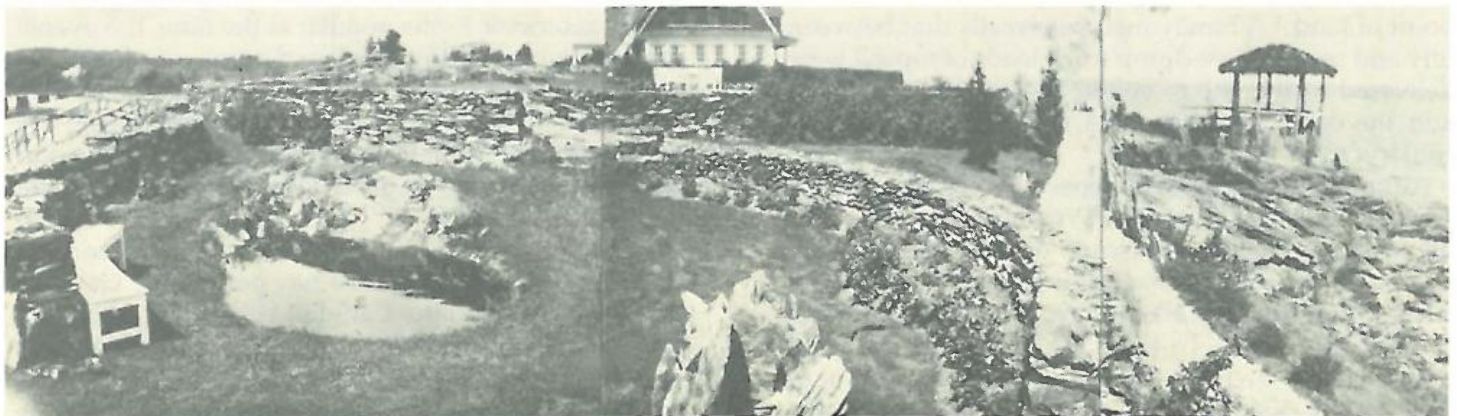


Figure 1. Weatherend, John Gribbel House, Rockport, c. 1918 view (Courtesy of Mrs. G. H. Kononen).



Figure 2. Hans Heistad Family at Weatherend, c. 1918 view (Courtesy of Mrs. G. H. Kononen).

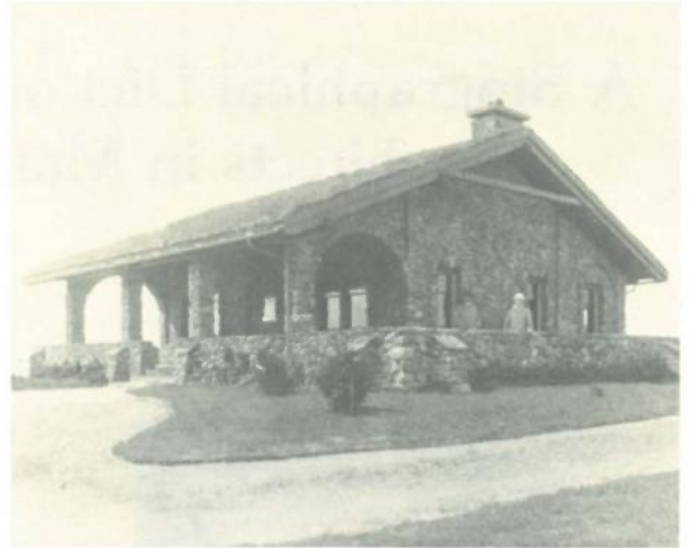


Figure 3. Beechnut, Rockport, 1916 view (MHPC).

Heistad was introduced to Maine in 1910 while employed by the Olmsted Brothers, a landscape architectural firm in Brookline, Massachusetts. The first project he worked on was at Chatwold, the Joseph Pulitzer Estate in Bar Harbor. By the end of that year, he settled in the Camden area, which, it is said, reminded him of his native Norway. Heistad moved his family members from Norway to Camden over a period of time extending from 1910 to 1915.¹ He provided design services for many summer residences in Camden and Rockport, including C. B. Borland, Mrs. Dean C. Osborne, the Porter sisters, Cyrus H. K. Curtis, and John Gribbel.² With the exception of the Gribbel commission, very little historical and physical documentation survives from Heistad's private commissions.

Heistad began working for John Gribbel in 1913, when he was hired to improve the grounds of "Weatherend", the family's summer cottage on Deadman Point in Rockport (Figure 1). The Shingle Style cottage, built under the direction of Cyrus Porter Brown of Camden, is oriented north/south on the site, with a circular drive and port cochere on the west elevation; the east elevation faces Penobscot Bay. Pre-improvement photographs show a rocky, barren, uneven point of land.³ A family member recalls that between fifty and seventy-five dump truck loads of topsoil were delivered to the site to soften the contours. To contain the earth, an enormous sea wall of stone was constructed.⁴

Although Heistad was exposed to the work of the Olmsted firm, his plan for "Weatherend" illustrates his personal view of landscape design. Heistad constructed a perimeter walk around the tip of Deadman Point, connecting the areas to the west, east and south of the main house. To the west, from the drive and port cochere, lawns sweep downward to a masonry wall. To the east the house is sited very closely to the ledge outcropping. It is the area to the south of the main house where Heistad concentrated his efforts.

This area is organized into terraced levels. The upper levels are defined by crescent-shaped masonry walls, the major vertical element in the composition. The lowest level, again defined by a masonry wall, is circular and the most geometric feature in the design. In addition to defining the spaces, the walls serve as a backdrop and protect the flowers from the ever present winds. Access to the perimeter walk is limited to a few openings in the wall, along which rustic log bridges span the rocky ledges. A stone-based, ocean-front prospect is located off the walk on a ledge outcropping. Rustic logs, similar to those used in the bridges, support a conical shaped sod roof. Heistad also took advantage of the existing natural features, by highlighting a rock outcropping, improving upon a natural grotto, and showcasing a glacial erratic. Early photographs show simple pieces of stone furniture: tables, chairs, and benches. The stone furniture was supplemented by wooden furniture that Heistad designed specifically for the various spaces. The round tables, arched benches, and chairs were painted a glossy white, introducing a formal element into the composition (Figure 2). Heistad's design for "Weatherend" was a clear departure from the highly organized, rigidly geometric forms popular at the time, the overall composition reflecting and extending outdoors the open, asymmetrical plan of the summer cottage.

In order to keep the work crews busy during the winter months, John Gribbel had Heistad design and supervise construction of a day lodge on Beech Hill in Rockport. "Beechnut", as the structure was called, was built as a shelter for picnics and afternoon tea (Figure 3). The 330 acre site has panoramic views of Penobscot Bay and the Camden Hills. Constructed in the winters between 1913 and 1915, "Beechnut" was inspired by traditional Norwegian mountain house designs.⁵ The one-story structure is made of rubble masonry walls with a sod-covered roof. The unique roof is constructed of two layers of sod laid back-to-

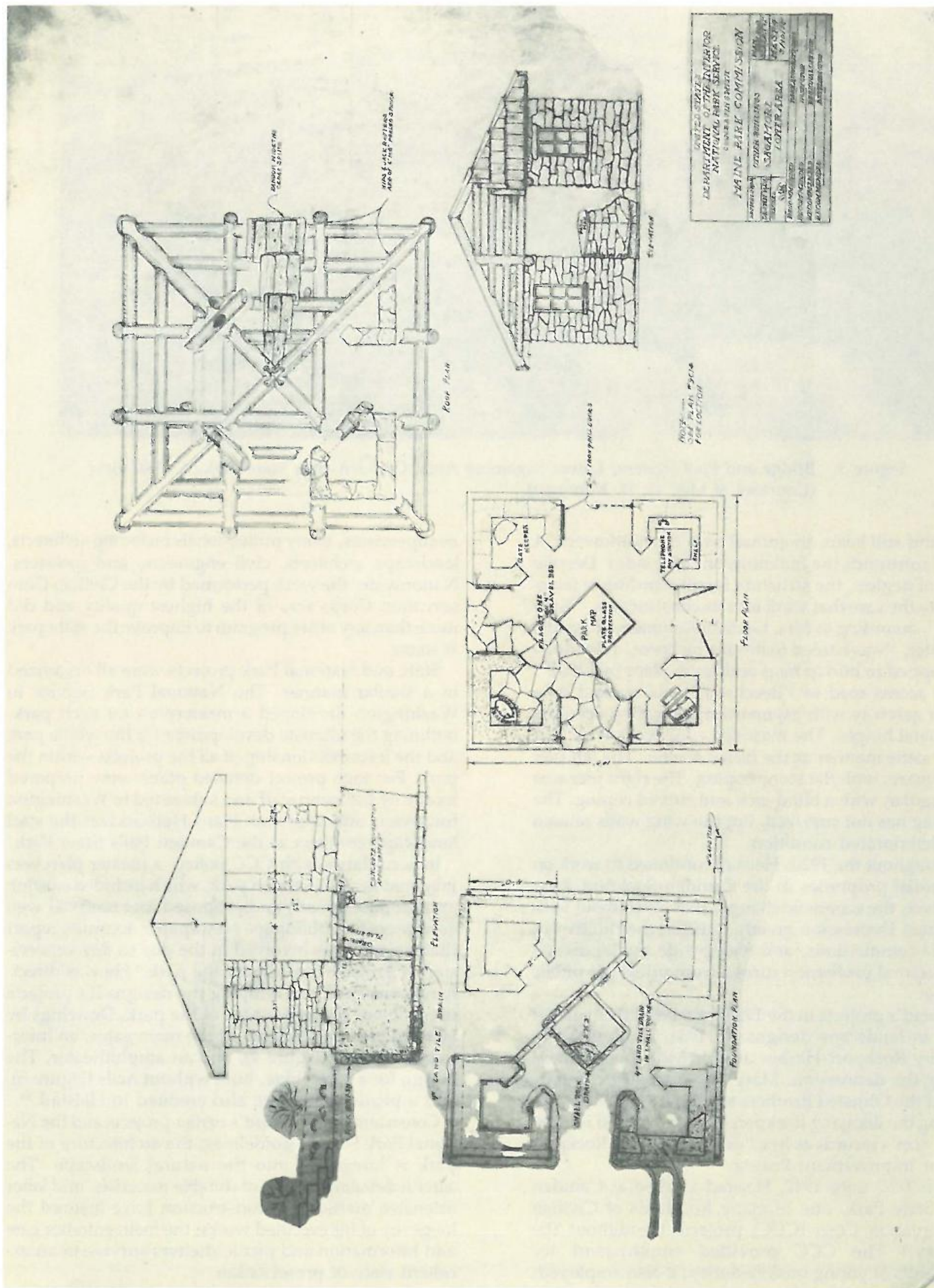


Figure 4. Working Drawing, Information Shelter, Camden Hills State Park, 1938 (Courtesy of Mrs. G. H. Kononen).



Figure 5. Bridge and Pool System, Lower Sagamore Area, Camden Hills State Park, c. 1940 view (Courtesy of Mrs. G. H. Kononen).

back and still bears an annual crop of wildflowers. A porch surrounds the buildings on three sides. Despite years of neglect, the structure is still standing, a testament to the care that went into its construction. "Each stone", according to Mrs. Gudrun Kononen, Heistad's daughter, "was hauled to the site by horse, individually wrapped in burlap bags and set in place by hand."

The access road to "Beechnut" was marked by a timber gateway with asymmetrical decorative detailing and metal hinges. The masonry wing walls were laid in the same manner as the picnic shelter. The left pier was square, with flat stone coping. The right pier was rectangular, with a blind arch and curved coping. The gateway has not survived, but the wing walls remain in a deteriorated condition.

Throughout the 1920s Heistad continued to work on residential properties in the Camden-Rockport area. However, the economic changes that came about with the Great Depression greatly reduced the number of private commissions, and nationwide the landscape architectural profession turned from private to public service.

Heistad's projects in the 1930s paralleled the national trend in landscape designs. In 1931, in an effort to beautify Rockport Harbor and provide employment during the depression, Mary Bok Zimbalist commissioned the Olmsted Brothers to prepare a plan for improving the decaying Rockport Harbor. Heistad is listed in the firm's records as head gardener for the Rockport Harbor Improvement Project.⁷

From 1935 until 1942, Heistad worked at Camden Hills State Park, one of many hundreds of Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) projects throughout the country.⁸ The CCC provided employment for thousands of young unskilled men; it also employed,

as supervisors, many professionals including architects, landscape architects, civil engineers, and foresters. Nationwide, the work performed by the Civilian Conservation Corps was of the highest quality and did more than any other program to improve the state park systems.

State and National Park projects were all organized in a similar manner. The National Park Service in Washington developed a masterplan for each park, outlining the ultimate development for the whole park and the inter-relationship of all the projects within the park. For each project detailed plans were prepared locally by the camp staff and submitted to Washington for review and approval. Hans Heistad was the staff landscape architect at the Camden Hills State Park.

In accordance with CCC policy, a master plan was prepared for the Camden park, which included existing and proposed roads and proposed foot paths as well as shelters and buildings. Newspaper accounts report that Heistad was involved in the day to day supervision of projects throughout the park.⁹ He was directly responsible for developing the designs for projects in the lower Sagamore area of the park. Drawings by Heistad include schemes for the main gates, an information shelter (Figure 4), and an amphitheater. The design for a footbridge, built without nails (Figure 5), and a picnic shelter are also credited to Heistad.¹⁰

Consistent with Heistad's earlier projects and the National Park Service guidelines, the architecture of the park is integrated into the natural landscape. The careful detailing, choice of durable materials, and labor intensive methods of construction have insured the longevity of his executed works; the main entrance gate and information and picnic shelters survive in an excellent state of preservation.



Hans O. Heistad in Camden Hills State Park, c. 1940 view (Courtesy of Mrs. G. H. Kononen).



Construction of Walk, Camden Hills State Park, c. 1938 view (Courtesy of Mrs. G. H. Kononen).

Along the northern edge of the lower Sagamore Area, between the park roadway and the park boundary, Heistad concentrated his efforts to create a series of landscaped areas, extending from a high point of land close to Route 1 to the shore of Penobscot Bay. The northern terminus is a sunken garden, encircling an enormous birch tree. Rock walls define a terraced area and double as seating around the tree. From this point, one can catch glimpses of the bay through the trees. Just beyond the sunken garden, Heistad created a small, spring-fed pool. At this point the vegetation changes from predominately deciduous to coniferous fir and spruce. The pond run off was channelled into a stream, along which, through the careful arrangement of stones, he created a series of pools and waterfalls (See Figure 5). Crossing the stream to the east is a picnic area. Four stone barbecue fireplaces along with stone tables and benches survive in a moss-covered state. The series of pools and waterfalls continue, ending as the run off empties into Penobscot Bay. Today the area is overgrown, but the design intention is clear. The stream served as the spine of the composition, pulling together the various landscaped areas.

Heistad's most ambitious project for the park was a 1,500 seat outdoor amphitheater sited with Penobscot Bay as a backdrop. Outdoor theaters, both public and private, were quite common in America at the time, and Heistad had worked on the Bok Amphitheater in Camden, which was designed by Fletcher Steele of Boston in 1929. In his design for the park amphitheater, Heistad again integrated the architectural elements into the natural setting. The plan called for a 50x25 foot stage and a 25x10 foot orchestra pit, set apart from the audience by a pond. This project, with notes in his own hand, perhaps best illustrates Heistad's vision of landscape design. He proposed:

...the seating in a mowed grass plot surrounded with low groups of rocks and rock plants outside, toward the path grass insprinkled with daisies and hawkweed, paths gravel and evergreen needles. Seats stone or split logs on stone base. The background heavy wooded spruce and cedar, band reflection. Between and over the tops is the bay and islands to be scenery. The proposed amphitheater, to be arranged that no atmosphere of school, or shopwork or art can be detected, except for the top of the seats if split logs is to be used.

Heistad's plan provided for:

Capacity according to need, from a small group to 1,500 people or more. The seats to be arranged in small and larger groups, from couple, family groups, to groups large enough for clubs, all with groups of shrubs open toward the stage in between the large planting groups so arranged that plants from the center can be removed to give room for more groups of people, if so should be needed. Tables if so desired be placed, so refreshments could be enjoyed right from the seats, also drinking fountains placed in two or more places—in rock formations and at each approach. Plantings, tables, and seats, may convenient and tastefully be without disturbing natural beauty and harmony.¹¹

Heistad worked on Camden Hills State Park until 1942, when the CCC was disbanded in order to concentrate resources on the war effort.

A successful landscape designer must embody an unusual combination of skills: a sense of design and visual relationships, an understanding of the natural environment, and a desire to work in public and private service. When Hans Heistad died in 1945, the *Camden Herald* paid tribute to him as a man who "... will be best remembered for his understanding heart for the less fortunate, for his high integrity of character, and for his sensitive religious spirit which had its deepest roots in nature."¹²

Elizabeth A. Igleheart
August, 1986

NOTES

- ¹ Biographical material relating to Hans Heistad was provided through the courtesy of his daughter, Mrs. G. H. Kononen of Rockport.
- ² Hans O. Heistad Obituary, *Camden Herald*, March 2, 1945.
- ³ Photographs taken by Heistad, in the possession of Mrs. Kononen.
- ⁴ Interview with the great-grandson of John Gribbel, James Gribbel, July 15, 1986.
- ⁵ Interview with Mrs. Kononen, January 16, 1986.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ January 19, 1977 letter from Mary Tynan, Olmsted Associates, Inc., to Mrs. Kononen, provided by National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site, Brookline, Mass.
- ⁸ In response to massive unemployment during the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933 as part of the New Deal's Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) program. The Civilian Conservation Corps was organized as a work force to carry out the ECW program. In 1937 the name of the ECW program was officially changed to Civilian Conservation Corps. The majority of CCC camps were in National or State Forests, working under the technical guidance of the United States Forest Service. A smaller number, under the National Park Service, were located in national, state, county, and metropolitan parks. Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land*, Cambridge, 1971, Chapter 8.
- ⁹ "Camden Hills Park Grows Popular", *Camden Herald*, No Date, 1938.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Notes on drawings in Heistad's hand. Courtesy of Mrs. Kononen.
- ¹² Heistad Obituary, *Camden Herald*, op. cit.

List of Known Commissions in Maine by Hans O. Heistad

Dr. George Phelps, Camden, c. 1910, Altered.
C. B. Borland, Camden, c. 1911-12, Altered.
"Porter Place", The Misses Porter, Camden, c. 1912-13, Altered.
"Beechnut", John Gribbel, Beech Hill, Rockport, 1913-15, Extant.
"Weatherend", John Gribbel, Rockport, 1913-18, Extant.
"Lyndonwood", Cyrus H. K. Curtis, Rockport, c. 1913-35, Altered.
Mrs. Dean Osborne, Camden, c. 1920s, Altered.
Thomaston High School, Thomaston, c. 1927, Altered.
Union High School, Union, c. 1927, Altered.
Montpelier, Thomaston, for Olmsted Associates, 1931, Altered.
Rockport Harbor Improvement Project, Rockport, for Olmsted Associates, 1931, Altered.
Camden Hills State Park, Camden, Staff Landscape Architect, 1935-42, Extant.

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

All known surviving architectural drawings by Hans O. Heistad are in the possession of his daughter, Mrs. G. H. Kononen. The collection includes a pencil drawing for the amphitheater in the Camden Hills State Park and blueprints of the information shelter and the main gate in the Lower Sagamore Area of the Park.

Photograph of Hans O. Heistad
Courtesy of Mrs. Gudrun Kononen.

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